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PHUM
SUBJECT: GAZA SITREP, JANUARY 12, 1200

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno. Reason 1.4 (b/d)

1. (SBU) Summary: Political debate continues within Israel about the future of Operation Cast Lead, with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, most of the security cabinet, and some senior leaders in the Israeli military successfully pushing forward with the campaign, while Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak reportedly lean toward ending hostilities. The cabinet has not authorized the next stage in operations -- which reportedly would require thousands of additional troops to enter Gaza, and could involve an additional 20 days of combat -- but reservists have begun participating in fighting within the Gaza Strip. While most Israel Defense Forces (IDF) ground activity is concentrated in the north of the strip, troops had begun operating inside densely-populated Gaza City. Embassy and ConGen Jerusalem officers are working with the ICRC and GOI to coordinate a U.S.-led multinational evacuation of foreign nationals from the Gaza Strip on Wednesday January 14 that would involve approximately 138 AMCITs and several hundred evacuees from over 20 other nations. A key issue remains how the evacuees from southern Gaza will cross Israeli lines. Israeli forces are scheduled to observe a humanitarian pause in fighting between 1000 and 1300 local, and Kerem Shalom, Erez, and -- for the first time since hostilities began -- Karni crossings are slated to be open. Nahal Oz fuel depot is closed. The Ambassador will meet on January 12 with the GOI humanitarian coordinator to discuss ways to facilitate improvements in humanitarian conditions. On the diplomatic front, Israeli Ministry of Defense Political Bureau head Amos Gilad's trip to Cairo to discuss Egyptian efforts to halt Hamas smuggling into Gaza was cancelled, according to press reports. End Summary.

ISRAELI DECISIO-MAKING

2. (SBU) The political and strategic debate about "Operation Cast Lead" continues in Israel, with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's determination to continue and expand operations holding sway. Olmert at the cabinet meeting on Sunday January 11 said that "Israel is approaching the goals it set for itself, but another effort is needed, and determination, in order to change the security reality in the south and bring security to its citizens." Israeli media reported that most of the security cabinet supports Olmert's view, as does the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) commander in the South, who was quoted as saying that stopping the operation now would be an historic mistake. He recommended that the Prime Minister authorize the next stage in fighting, which would involve thousands of additional reservist troops deploying in Gaza. Senior military sources said that the next stage of the operation could take 20 days. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni reportedly prefers a halt in the offensive because she fears potential diplomatic fallout and she assesses that deterrence has been established and would only be undermined if hostilities continue. Defense Minister Ehud Barak, according to Israeli media, also opposes escalation because of his concerns about inserting ground troops deep into densely populated areas of Gaza.

MILITARY OPERATIONS

13. (C) The Cabinet has not been asked to authorize the so-called third stage of operations, but Israeli newspapers all led on January 12 with stories recounting how reserve units had recently been deployed in Gaza. So far, this appears to be only a tactical change rather than strategic change in the operation, and it may be meant to signal to Hamas that an intensification of operations is imminent and that the terrorist group should meet Israel's demands for a cease-fire immediately. Elsewhere, Israel continued to concentrate efforts in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, but began operations inside Gaza City over the weekend. Militants reportedly fired as many as 22 rockets on Sunday, though the IDF on Sunday said that there has been a "dramatic" drop in Hamas's ability to launch rockets at Israel. On the morning of January 12, a Grad rocket scored a direct hit on a home in Ashkelon, but the inhabitants managed to escape injury in the basement of the building. Nearly 900 Palestinians have been killed during Operation Cast Lead, along with 3,695 who have been injured. Israeli casualty totals stand at 10 soldiers and three civilians killed, with several hundred soldiers wounded.

HUMANITARIAN

14. (C) Embassy and ConGen are working with the ICRC and GOI to coordinate a U.S.-led multinational evacuation of foreign nationals from the Gaza Strip on Wednesday January 14. We currently anticipate 138 AMCITs and several hundred evacuees from over 20 other nations to participate in the evacuation.

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GOI has pledged to keep the Allenby border crossing between Israel and Jordan open as long as necessary to accommodate the transfer. EMBOFFs are coordinating with the IDF on how evacuees from southern Gaza will cross IDF lines en route to the Erez crossing.

15. (SBU) The IDF has reiterated its intention to board and arrest any vessel that approaches within 20 nautical miles of the Gaza coast. On January 11, the "Free Gaza Movement" formally notified the Israeli MOD of its intention to navigate a vessel called "The Spirit of Humanity" (flying a Greek flag) from Larnaca, Cyprus, to the port of Gaza City. The movement, which is currently holding a press conference, indicated that it expected the vessel to depart January 12 (1200 local) and to arrive in Gaza on January 13 carrying medical supplies.

16. (SBU) Israel is slated to again observe a "humanitarian pause" in fighting on January 12 between 1000 and 1300 local. The IDF observed a similar three-hour pause on Sunday. Kerem Shalom crossing is open today, with up to 105 trucks expected to transit into Gaza. Karni crossing was to open for the first time since hostilities began and 90 truckloads of grain were to pass through the crossing. However, no Palestinian trucks have shown up on the Gaza side as of 1200 hours. Erez crossing was open for urgent humanitarian cases and the crossing of relief workers. Fifty of the 88 NGO medical team members who applied for entry have been vetted, approved, and have entered or will enter via Erez today, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Nahal Oz fuel crossing is closed for security reasons.

17. (U) The Ambassador is meeting with Joint Coordination Room chief Gen. Baruch Spiegel (Res.) at 1600 hours local to discuss the GOI's current and proposed humanitarian relief efforts in Gaza. The Israeli Defense Ministry also announced that it is transmitting live video of humanitarian supplies transiting the Kerem Shalom crossing, a further step in its efforts to counter many of the negative images being broadcast by local and international media during the war.

DIPLOMACY

18. (U) Israeli newspapers on Monday January 12 reported that Israeli Ministry of Defense Political Bureau head Amos Gilad's follow-up trip to Cairo to discuss Egyptian efforts to halt Hamas smuggling into Gaza had been called off. One Israeli newspaper suggested that the Prime Minister's office scuttled Gilad's trip so that Israeli operations could continue unabated. Separately, sources in Olmert's bureau said that Egypt has begun to relax its stance on bringing in American and European engineering experts to deal with tunnels near the Rafah crossing.

NORTHERN BORDERS

19. (C) Israeli media reported that gunshots were fired at an IDF vehicle operating along the border with Syria. The vehicle was carrying Israeli civilians and soldiers who were conducting engineering work along the border. No injuries were reported. Military sources said it was likely a lone Syrian gunman. UNDOF was notified and the IDF has heightened its patrols along the route, according to the USDAO. Elsewhere in the north, the USDAO reported that there was no new movement of reservists headed south for combat or for pre-combat training at the Tse'elim National Ground Training Center.

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